**Taft’s Administration**

In 1908, President Teddy Roosevelt could have easily carried his burgeoning popularity to a sweeping victory in the presidential election, but in 1904 he made an impulsive promise not to seek a second elected term. However, he did not intend to completely relinquish control, so he handpicked a successor. Howard Taft, the 350-pound Secretary of War, was chosen as the Republican candidate for 1908. Taft was a mild progressive and an easygoing man that Roosevelt and other Republican leaders felt they could control. Taft easily defeated the Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, and the Socialist candidate, Eugene Debs, in what can be construed as continued public endorsement of Roosevelt.

Unfortunately, from the onset of his administration Taft did not live up to Roosevelt’s standards or the expectations of other Progressives. He lacked Roosevelt’s strength of personality and was more passive in his dealings with Congress. Many politicians were surprised to learn that Taft did not share some of the Progressive ideas and policies that Roosevelt endorsed. In fact, many people felt that Taft lacked the mental and physical stamina necessary to be an effective President.

The first major blow to the Progressives during Taft’s administration was the Payne-Aldrich Tariff of 1909. Taft called a special session of Congress to address what many people felt were excessive tariffs. After this session, the House of Representatives passed a bill that moderately restricted tariffs, but their legislation was severely modified when it reached the Senate. Radical Senators, led by Nelson W. Aldrich of Rhode Island, tacked on hundreds of revisions that effectively raised tariffs on almost all products. Taft eventually signed the bill and declared it “the best bill that the Republican Party ever passed.” This action dumbfounded Progressives and marked the beginning of an internal struggle for control of the Republican Party.

Another issue that caused dissension among Republicans was Taft’s handling of conservation issues. Taft was a dedicated conservationist and he devoted extensive resources to the protection of the environment. However, most of his progress was undone by his handling of the Ballinger-Pinchot dispute. Pinchot, the leader of the Department of Forestry and a well-liked ally of Roosevelt, attacked Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger for how he handled public lands.

Ballinger opened up thousands of acres of public lands in Wyoming, Montana, and Alaska for private use, and this angered many Progressives. Pinchot was openly critical of Ballinger, and in 1910 Taft responded by firing Pinchot for insubordination. This infuriated much of the public as well as the legions of political players who were still fiercely loyal to Roosevelt.

A major rift occurred in the Republican Party as a result of Taft’s straying from Progressive policy. The party was split down the middle between the “Old Guard” Republicans who supported Taft and the Progressive Republicans who backed Roosevelt. This division in the Republican Party allowed Democrats to regain control of the House of Representatives in a landslide victory in the congressional elections of 1910.

In early 1912, Roosevelt triumphantly returned and announced himself as a challenger for the Republican presidential nomination. Roosevelt and his followers, embracing “New Nationalism,” began to furiously campaign for the nomination. However, as a result of their late start and Taft’s ability as incumbent to control the convention, they were unable to secure the delegates necessary to win the Republican candidacy. Not one to admit defeat, Roosevelt formed the “Bull Moose” Party and vowed to enter the race as a third-party candidate.

The split in the Republican Party made the Democrats optimistic about regaining the White House for the first time since 1897. They sought a reformist candidate to challenge the Republicans, and decided on Woodrow Wilson, a career academic and the current progressive governor of New Jersey. Wilson’s “New Freedom” platform sought reduced tariffs, banking reform, and stronger antitrust legislation. The Socialists again nominated Eugene V. Debs whose platform sought public ownership of resources and industries. As expected, Roosevelt and Taft split the Republican vote, and Wilson easily won a majority of the electoral votes. Having received only 41 percent of the popular vote, Wilson was a minority president.

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